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Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas Urges Support of AB 1461 Creating Automatic Voter Registration at the DMV

Acting on a motion by Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, the Board of Supervisors directed Los Angeles County's advocates in the state Capitol to support AB 1461, which calls for automatically registering eligible voters when they get or renew their driver license at the Department of Motor Vehicles.

"By streamlining voter registration, AB 1461 – the California New Motor Voter Act – has the potential to reverse the alarming decline in voter turnout in Los Angeles County and beyond," the supervisor said. "As we prepare to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act, it is imperative that we clear away any barriers that prevent eligible voters from participating in the democratic process."

The federal National Voter Registration Act of 1993 requires each state to register a person to vote simultaneously with an application for a new or renewed driver license. Currently, California is not in compliance with that provision because the DMV has separate forms for driver license and voter registration, according to a memo from the county's chief executive office.

Sponsored by Secretary of State Alex Padilla and modeled on a recently enacted law in Oregon, AB 1461 would create the California New Motor Voter Program requiring that eligible voters who obtain or renew a driver license be placed on the state's active voter roll automatically, with an opportunity to opt out.

It would require that data already being collected by the DMV be transmitted electronically to the Secretary of State (SOS), who serves as California's chief elections officer.

Currently, both the DMV and SOS rely on a manual voter registration system that is more than 20 years old. Being paper-based, it is prone to problems caused by illegible handwriting, inaccurate information, data duplication and operator error.

Supervisor Ridley-Thomas noted California's voter turnout in the 2014 elections was the lowest since World War II. An estimated 7 million Californians, including 1.2 million in Los Angeles County, were eligible to vote but did not register.

With AB 1461, those meeting the minimum qualifications to register would automatically be added to the state's active voter rolls once they obtain or renew their driver license. They can then either choose a political party affiliation, or opt out of registration by submitting a request to their county elections official. To address privacy concerns, AB 1461 prohibits the transfer of non-citizen information to the Secretary of State.

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